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Fantasy Elements Portrayed as Coping Mechanisms in Studio Ghibli Movies

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Abstract

This paper delves into the various fantasy elements and characters portrayed in Studio Ghibli films. On the surface level, these movies are soothing and childlike, but on a deeper analysis it can be shown that these fantasy elements are meant to stabilize the characters and give them a space to process their trauma. The movies chosen for this paper- My Neighbor Totoro, Kiki's delivery service, Spirited Away, When Marnie was Here and The Boy and The Heron employ themes of escapism. Through a close lens, it can be illustrated that the protagonists of these movies often undergo loneliness or identity crisis, and through the supernatural encounters they are allowed the space to process their emotions and become more responsible. In contrast, The Boy and The Heron, a later work of Hayao Miyazaki highlights fantasy as a confrontational space. By discussing theories of childhood psychology within these films, the paper argues how Studio Ghibli redefines fantasy as a narrative tool for emotional resilience.

Keywords: *Fantasy, coping mechanism, Studio Ghibli, emotions, conflict, resilience, escapism, Totoro, Kiki, Chihiro, Marnie, Mahito.*

Introduction

Studio Ghibli is a Japanese animation studio that is based in Tokyo and it was founded in 1985 in a June 15 by the directors Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata and producer Toshio Suzuki after acquiring Topcraft's assets. The studio has a prominent presence in the animation industry and has managed to expand its portfolio to include different types of media like short subjects, television commercials and television films. The media work of the studio is highly acclaimed by both critics and audiences and has been recognized with various awards.

The mascot of Studio Ghibli (Picture Above) is the most popular character which is Totoro from the 1988 film My Neighbor Totoro. The major awards of Studio Ghibli include two Academy Awards for Best Animated Feature, one Golden Globe award for Best Animated Feature Film won Bafta Award for Best Animated film, three Animax Grand prix awards and sales Japanese academy prizes.

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The importance of fantasy in Ghibli movies can be depicted as a way to make everyone including the child and the adult feel peaceful and hopeful after the movies. Most of the Ghibli movies highlight the period of childhood and include different fantasy elements like Totoro, a giant bearlike creature, The cat Baron in Whisper of the Heart.

Research Problem

The studies on the Studio Ghibli movies have usually focused on visual aesthetics or cultural symbolism. Consequently, very limited attention has been given to how the fantasy elements in the Ghibli movies function as psychological coping mechanisms for child protagonists who are grappling with trauma, loss and emotional stability. While fantasy in animation films has often been laid aside as escapist storytelling, the narratives of the Ghibli movies advocate that the magical words represent deeper psychological purposes. Hence, the problem in the study dresses how fantasy in the selected Ghibli movies **(My Neighbor Totoro, When Marnie was Here, Spirited Away, Kiki's Delivery Service and The Boy and The Heron**) can operate as an emblematic framework through which characters encounter loneliness, identity crisis and emotional transition.

Thesis Statement

This paper insists that the fantasy elements in the selected Studio Ghibli films-**My Neighbor Totoro, When Marnie was Here, Spirited Away, Kiki's Delivery Service and The Boy and The Heron** function as symbolic coping mechanisms that allow the protagonist to process trauma and emotional destruction. Ghibli movies are not only escapism but the fantastical environments in the movies create a psychological space where identity conflicts and existential anxiety can be negotiated. In contrast to the earlier films that use fantasy as a protective environment, The Boy and the Heron flips the script and presents fantasy as a confrontation space that forces the protagonist to accept loss and uncertainty.

Literature Review

Studies on Fantasy Cinema

Human beings have a natural tendency to drift away even while unconscious and that can point to a meta psychological and more ordinary way of thinking. The word "phantasy" has been used to signify a contrast to "reality", the latter word used to identify with the external or material facts (Isaacs, 74). This is an implied assumption which refuses to the psychical reality its own objectivity as a mental fact. The elements of fantasy have pervaded into many genres in covert ways. Even and social melodramas fantastic elements have been smuggled. The ability of cinema to represent the fantastic and the supernatural has continued to be its primary allure in the Indian context and elsewhere (Bhrugubanda, 87).

Gap in Existing Research

A significant gap that can be found in the existing research is how the Ghibli movies are only expected to conform to the children's imagination and expectations. However, the nature of Ghibli movies with fantasy elements is evergreen for adults and children of every age. The magnificent cinematography and Miyazaki's excellent story telling can portray the simplest of the scenes in an artistic tone.

Theoretical framework

Fantasy As Symbolic Space

The fantasy realm can often become an internal architecture for adults who have also been through trauma. The fantasy elements in Ghibli movies and then other movies can serve as a sophisticated psychological architecture for both children and adults. It should not be just categorized as dreaming; it can be a method of free organizing a broken reality.

In today's world nuclear families are increasing and parents are mostly busy with their own work or on their phones. The natural fields which acted as playgrounds have been reduced and for today's generation of children watching the Ghibli movies can give them a sense of family and care giving in a way that could be missing in their real life. Additionally, the magical space and the fantasy creatures can be viewed as symbolic guardians for both the children and adults. Anime in general is known to improve the mental health of the audience you respect for their age. In Japanese culture mythology and reality often coexist in a beautifully balanced manner. In the Ghibli movies the same thing has been shown as to how the adults and fantasy creatures like Totoro exist in the same scene.

Child Centered Psychology

Several different types of psychological theories and principles have been explored in the Ghibli movies. Jean Piaget commented on the animism theory prominent in the pre-operational stage emphasizes that children believe nonliving objects to possess life-like qualities (Smith, 258). Children in this stage pretend play and experiment their ability to symbolically understand the world.

In My Neighbor Totoro, Piaget's theory of Animism has been touched upon, when Mei talks to the inanimate objects believed to be real. In both the movies the magic is only accessible to the children because they are in a particular development stage where the boundary between the self in the world is still blurry. Both Vygotsky and Piaget viewed the child as an "active scientist". In the Ghibli movies the children don't just watch the magic, they interact with the magic and negotiate with it and then use the same magic to grow themselves. Both Chihiro and Mei take the shelter of magical beings to regulate their fears and the magic gives a form to things that are too vast or complicated for a child or an adult to give to say in words. Psychologist Erik Erikson opined 8 stages of development focused on various levels which show specific psychological conflict that can shape identity and growth (Syed and C. McLean, 579). The different stages:

- Stage 1: Trust Vs Mistrust (From birth to 18 months)
- Stage 2: Autonomy Vs Shame and Doubt (From 18 months to 3 years)
- Stage 3: Initiative Vs Guilty (From 3 to 5 years)
- Stage 4: Industry Vs. Inferiority (From 6 to 11 years)
- Stage 5: Identity Vs Confusion (From 12 to 18 years)
- Stage 6: Intimacy Vs Isolation (From 18 to 40)
- Stage 7: Generative Vs Stagnation (From 40 to 65 years)
- Stage 8: Integrity Vs Despair. (From 65 years till death)

In Spirited Away Chihiro goes through Stage 4 when she is compelled to work at the Bathhouse.

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a concept which was developed by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky who elucidated the gap between what water learners can do independently and what they can achieve with the guidance from a knowledgeable person like a teacher. According to Vygotsky, the cognitive abilities increase significantly as the learner counters information. Scaffolding is described as a temporary support system that can help the learners progress through their ZPD until they can become independent to perform the tasks on their own (Chen and Adams, 930). The scaffolding can be seen in Totoro who supports the girls, in Ursula who guides Kiki.

Analysis of Films

i) Fantasy as emotional shelter in My Neighbor Totoro

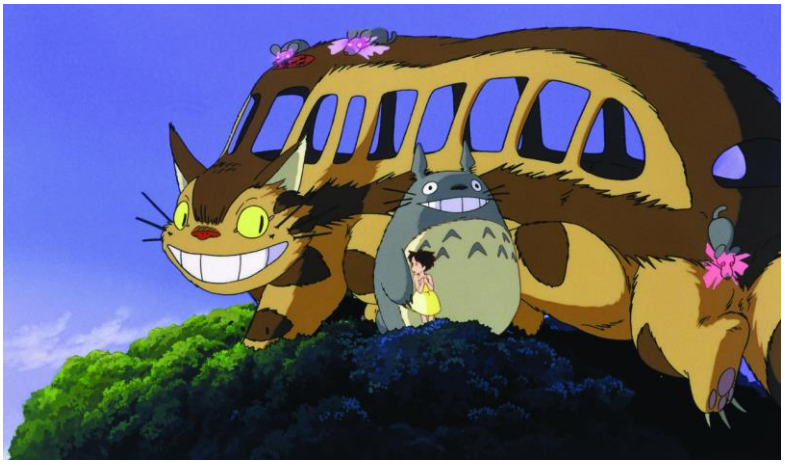
In the movie My Neighbor Totoro the fantasy creature, appeared during an emotional discharge when the mother of the two sisters is admitted to the hospital and their father is away for work most of the time. Totoro does not offer solutions, instead functions as a comfort person to provide momentary relief to Satsuki and Mei during times of stress or making them realize that despite their mother being in the hospital they should hope and continue to live their lives. It has been noted that nature-based fantasy can stabilize anxiety and make children and adults feel safer and calmer after watching My neighbor Totoro.

(Scene: The sisters playing with Totoro)

In the movie the magic has a subtle relation to nature which is a correspondence to object relations theory and Vygotsky's private speech theory (Sawyer,256). Jean Piaget has emphasized that children often talk to inanimate objects in order to process trauma through animism. Totoro represents the spirit of the forest but psychologically it represents a transitional object for the girls to process the ongoing distress of their hospitalized mother in the movie.

(Scene: The Rain scene in My Neighbor Totoro)

Vygotsky emphasized on emotional scaffolding which can be seen when Totoro appears when the girls are standing all alone in the rain, Totoro does not fix the problems but make them feel safe and stay with them until their father comes back from work. The emotional scaffolding refers to the temporary and affective interactions that are provided by a more knowledgeable person (a teacher or a peer) to help a learner manage emotions and state motivated within their Zone of Proximal Development .



(Scene: Totoro summoning the Cat bus for Satsuki)

(Scene: The sisters standing with Totoro as he makes trees grow)

The magic realism can be understood through the characters of the cat bus that finds the younger sister when the oldest sister feels distressed and even takes them to see their parents at the hospital. The growing of the giant tree overnight is a metaphor for the resilience of childhood. In the Ghibli movies magic exists side by side with the real world like the hospital visits and the farm work showing that a child's imagination is the functional tool for survival.

ii) Fantasy and identity crisis in Kiki's delivery service

The magic that has been shown in Kiki's delivery service parallels the adolescent creativity phase of every teenager

(A tired Kiki after delivering orders all day)

(Scene: Kiki flying to deliver an order in a heavy downpour)

When Kiki loses her ability to fly and communicate with Jiji, it is not a course from the outside, it is an internal block. In psychology this represents adolescence burnout. She turns her passion into a job which is the delivery service and faces rejection in the social platform due to which self-worth is reduced. The term "burnout" is used to denote the psychological symptoms of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization that can occur in individuals who work with other individuals in some capacity (Maslach, 212).

(Scene: Kiki's broom breaking)

The recovery of a magic is tied to acceptance and not power. She starts making herself independent while learning how to write a bicycle and without the presence of Jiji she learns to accept herself as she is and slowly magic also comes back. In the movie, the invulnerability myth has been beautifully portrayed by emphasizing that adolescents often believe that they should be perfect in order to be accepted by society or the adults. However, the moment Kiki comes to the realization that she is just an ordinary girl who also happens to be a witch, her magic instantly returns can be viewed as a shift from external validation flying to please others to internal mastery flying because it is an inherent part of her.

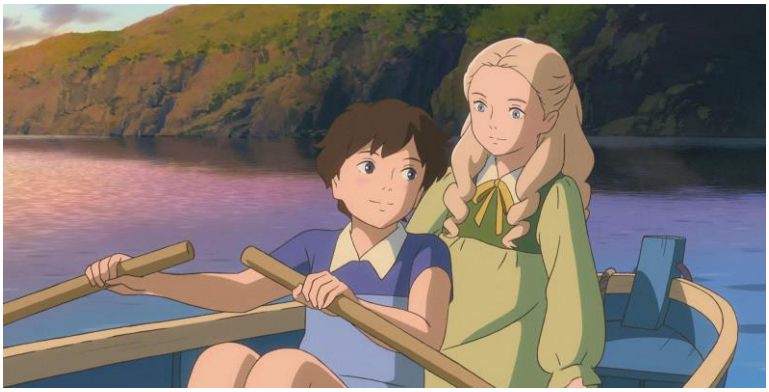
(Scene: Ursula talks to Kiki about taking rest)

The character of Ursula can be seen as the mentor figure for Kiki who explains that the spirit of a witch is very similar to the spirit of an artist and it comes and goes and when it is gone it is important to take rest. The Mentor figure essentially provides scaffolding and a vital lesson in emotional regulation.

iii) Fantasy as Trauma processing in When Marnie Was Here

In the film, Anna believes that there is a circle of children who are loved and normal and she is necessarily outside that circle. Anna was adopted by a couple after the death of her biological parents as an infant. She discovered that she is adopted from a paper that was carelessly lying around. The paper contained information which described that Anna's adoptive parents receive monetary support from the Japanese government because they adopted. After knowing this, Anna starts believing that if her parents did not receive the money, they would not keep her. This triggers a sense of worthlessness in Anna and causes tremendous pain physically and mentally.

(Scene: Anna drawing all alone)



(Scene: Anna and Marnie on the boat)

The relationship that Anna shares with Marnie is shown as a fantasy relationship which is also a psychological projection of Anna's loneliness. The psychological projection and the fantasy relationship allow and are two confronted with the abandonment and the memory of a parents and her grandmother. The emotional truth that is validated arrives after the fantasy character has been dissolved.

Marnie shows up in the movie to make Anna feel that connection that she could not find in her real life and reminded her that she is not just a passenger in the journey but she is also someone who laughs who dances who paints. Several scholars and audience are led to believe that Anna heals because she met a ghost of a grandmother. However, the healing occurred because the fantasy of Marnie gives her a space to practice emotions again. In the movie it can be understood that fantasy is not about ignoring the reality, but it is about finding the joy and the beauty again.

With the friendship of Marnie, Anna started to become more compassionate and kinder towards her adoptive relatives and her mother and started living her life as a person who enjoys living rather than just passing through it. Anna thought she was all alone in her life without any blood relatives, however, when she truly discovered her history, she became the main character of your own life.

(Scene: Anna attending a local festival with Nobuko standing Infront of her)

When Anna is in survival mode she is withdrawn and sees everyone including Nobuko and her mother as a threat or a burden when in reality, she thinks herself to be a burden. However, as she starts developing a connection with Marnie the internal bank of love and safety which was empty slowly starts filling up and gradually, she starts forgiving her mother and also saying sorry to Nobuko for calling her a fat girl. For anyone who has suffered trauma for both children and adults, the real world can sometimes feel extremely serious and isolated whereas the fantasy realm or a fantasy character allows them to practice vulnerability in a safe imaginary space before they try it out in the real world. Anna's "sorry", is not just about the other people it is also about forgiving herself for thinking herself to be lovable. In this case, the fantasy realm essentially helps the survivor realize that the pollution was not there to begin with.

Anna can be seen as a textbook example of insecure avoidance attachment type. The insecure avoidant attachment is described as a relationship style that is characterized by a deep discomfort with emotional intimacy and a higher need for independence. Napier and Taylor (630) opinionated to originate from childhood neglect and individuals with this style often suppress emotions and appear aloof.

Because of the history of a loss of both her biological parents and grandmother she has developed what can be called a protective shell. Her believing that he is outside the circle where everyone else is locked represents her deep-seated emotion of being unworthy or other. Her rudeness and withdrawal can be viewed as a defense mechanism because if she does not let anybody then nobody can leave her or hurt her. In the beginning of the film and described as ordinary in a way that she feels empty.

Psychologically, the Marsh house and morning represent a dissociative space for Anna where she can process a drummer without the noise of the real world. Morning functions as a bridge which links to Anna's lost history. By playing and connecting with morning and is actually representing herself where she is searching the love that she lost in her infancy so she can finally trust adoptive mother in the present. The film deals heavily with unfinished business which is the memories that happened yet fully processed.

Anna's journey is all about integration. She has split her life into before the trauma and after the void Marnie weaves those two back together (Kris, 166). Once Anna realizes who Marnie actually was, the split in her psyche heals instantly in the ending of the film having an emotional growth which is also a perfect illustration of post traumatic growth.

iv) Fantasy as Transitional space in Spirited Away

The spirit world mirrors the fear of adulthood. Chihiro does not have a name in Spirited Away; the loss of name is equal to the identity crisis she faces in the spirit world as a human being (Hatano,977). The fantasy enables the gradual emotional maturation that she reaches without the presence of a parent. Spirited away can be viewed as a classic hero's journey or individuation. Carl Jung's individuation is a central and lifelong process of psychological development which is aimed at becoming a fully realized unique self (Pătru, 124). By integrating the conscious and conscious elements like the persona and the shadow the individuals move from fragmentation towards wholeness and break free from the collective societal conditioning to achieve mature self-awareness.

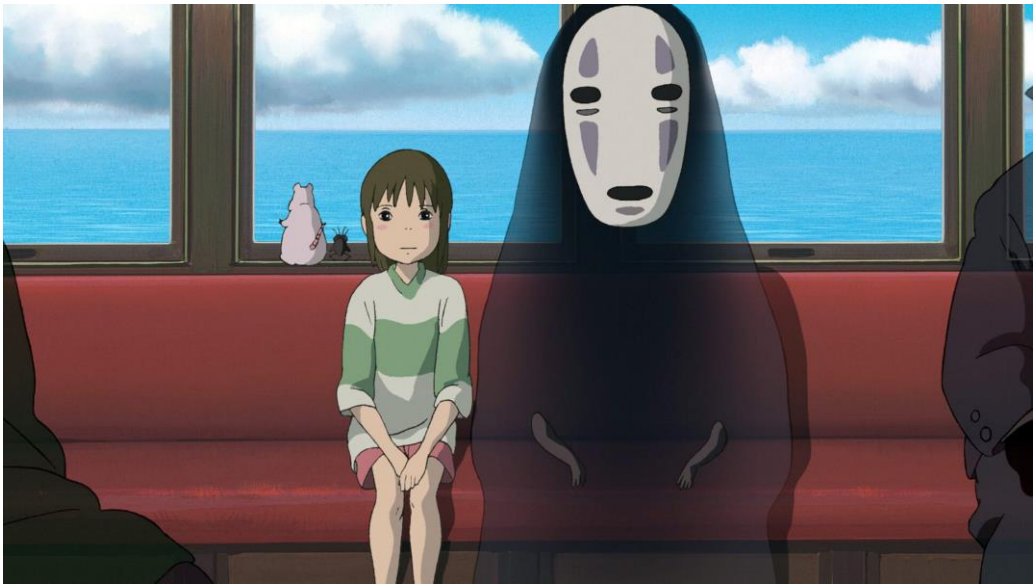
(Scene: Chihiro looking at the bathhouse)

In the movie Yubaba steals her name and turns it into "Sen", which represents a psychological struggle for self-identity. In trauma or major life transitions like Chihiro moving schools a child can feel that they are losing who they are. The movie essentially captures Chihiro's journey from a whiny dependent child into becoming a person who is able to solve her own problems.

For example, in Spirited away Chihiro starts as a dependent child and through the magic of the bathhouse she is forced into the industry where she has to work for at the bathhouse or she would have been turned into animals like her parents.

(Scene: Chihiro cleaning the Stink Spirit as Yubaba watches)

She learns to solve complex problems like cleaning the stink spirit. This particular scene can be seen as an accurate illustration of Erikson's Stage 4, where a child gains a sense of competence. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is focused on 8 stages from infancy to late adulthood, where individuals solve specific crisis influenced by social and cultural factors.



(Scene: Chihiro traveling with No Face)

Additionally, the characters like no face represent the shadow self, which can be explained as the unconscious repressed side of personality that comprises the desires like loneliness, greed and hunger that every human being tries to hide. The term Shadow Self was coined by Carl Jung and this concept includes the traits like anger, jealousy and it is often formed in childhood to fit the social norms (Casement 30). The ability of Chihiro to treat No Face with kindness without being consumed by him shows her psychological maturity.

v) Fantasy as a psychic labyrinth in The Boy and The Heron

This particular movie is a much darker film than the other Ghibli movies that have been highlighted in this paper. In boy and the heron, Mahito is living a complicated life that comes after the violent death of the mother. Early in the film Mahito hits himself with a rock. This can be seen as a physical manifestation of internal pain which shows a child trying to gain control over the environment feels powerless with his mother's death and the new stepmother. The displacement trauma that comes attached with a new family and new town.

(Scene: The Boy and Heron)

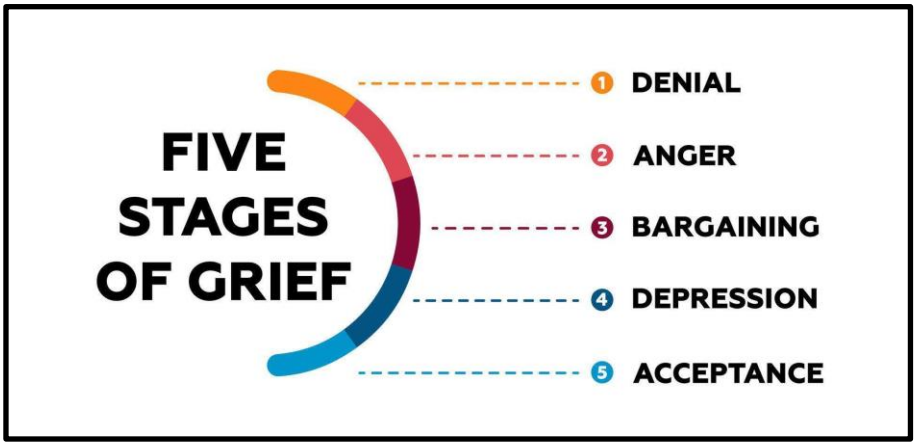
(Scene: Mojito standing all alone on a cliff)

Unlike other Ghibli movies Mahito does not see comfort he does not enhance the fantasy world is not a safe haven but a psychic labyrinth, which reflects Mahito's confusion, anger and emotional numbness. The fantasy world in the boy and the heron is significantly different from the other Ghibli movies because fantasy here mirrors a mind that is disrupted by trauma and not imagination. The Heron acts as a trauma figure which is aggressive and deceptive; it also functions as a voice that forces confrontation and symbolizes intrusive thoughts.

The tower that is shown in the movie is a psychological metaphor which represents the collapsing world and the impossibility of rebuilding the past. The tower in this film is represented as a dissociative space. The magical world that Mahito enters eventually can be viewed as a state of dissociation when trauma is too much to bear, a child may retreat into a complex inner world.

(Scene: Mahito and Granduncle)

The character of the Granduncle can be represented as the happy birthday of intergenerational trauma and the pressure to fix a broken world, and we see that in that fantasy realm Mahito is offered the power to stabilize the world equivalent to freezing the trauma rather than healing from it. The journey of Mahito to save Natsuko, who is his stepmother, is his psychological transition from resentment to acceptance. He ceases to see her as a replacement for his mother and begins to view her as a person he can choose to love. Essentially this transition can be seen to portray the five stages of grief.



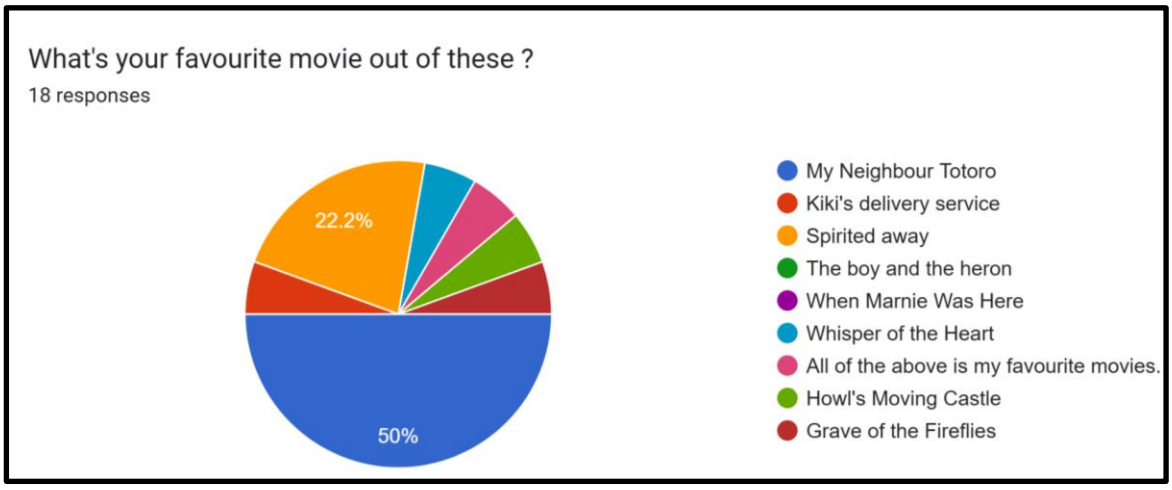
(Daniel, 1141)

The above diagram illustrates the five stages of grief namely denial, grief bargaining, depression and anxiety. The framework was given by Elisabeth Kubler Ross to understand the emotional process that is associated with coping with the loss these stages are nonlinear which means the individuals can experience them in a different order (Gerhardt and Roman, 988).

The unstable blocks that the Grand uncle balances can be represented as the fragility of a fractured psyche. The refusal of Mahito to take over that world shows that he has reached the individuation (Carl Jung) stage and he chooses to live in a broken real world rather than a perfect fake one.

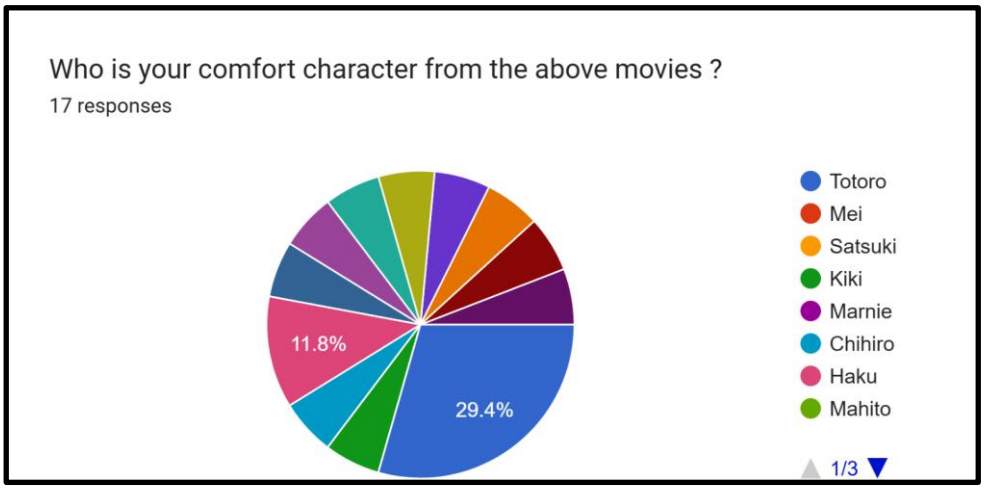
Results and Analysis of a Short survey

I created a Google Forms and requested few of my friends and acquaintances to fill up the form, who like me share the love of Ghibli films. The results of the survey will be analyzed below. The responders are all adults in the age group of 20-35 years.



Question 1. What is your favorite Ghibli movie?

From the above chart it can be interpreted that 50% chose My Neighbor Totoro as their favorite movie, 22.2% chose Spirited Away, 5.6% chose Kiki's delivery service and Howl's moving castle, 5.6% chose Whisper of the Heart, 5.6% chose all of the above. [Note: Grave of the Fireflies is a war movie, not a fantasy movie. The responders were free to choose their own movie]



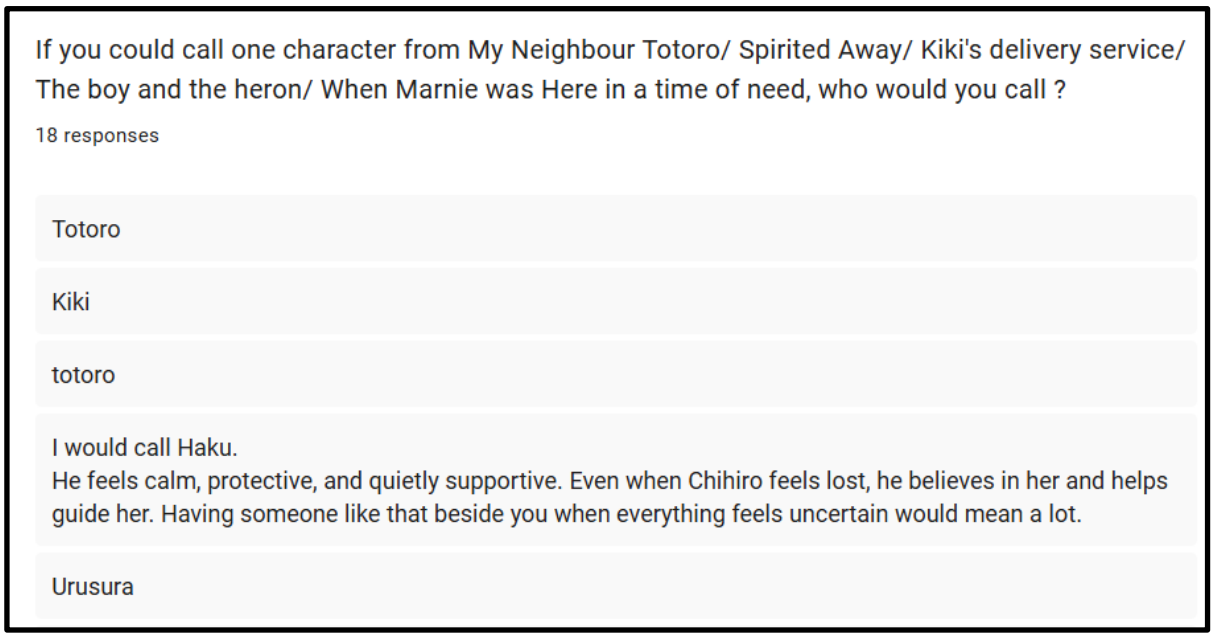
Question 2. Who is your comfort character from these movies?

The responders answered in a versatile way choosing a range of characters from Ghibli movies. 29.4% chose Totoro as their comfort character, whereas 11.8% chose Haku from Spirited Away. The percentage of responders who chose Chihiro, Satsuki, Kiki, Marnie and Mahito.

How do you feel about Fantasy elements shown in these Ghibli movies ?
18 responses
For me the fantasy in Ghibli movies feels like a reflection of emotions we often cannot explain. The magical worlds appear when the characters are going through confusion, loneliness, or change. It feels like imagination giving shape to feelings that are otherwise invisible. Instead of escaping reality, the fantasy helps the characters understand themselves and grow stronger.
I have always been mesmerized
Ghibli movies properly captures the childlike imagination and fantasy. Helps relive and keep the innocence alive, making way for romances of life.
It's not only fantasy, but I has multiplayer interpretation which focus on war, human emotional conflict, Climate change, civilization - nature relationship.
They bring a sense of comfort, a yearn for belonging that I always feel. In a way, I find them to be so similar to me, so close to my heart despite being fictional. I think, if they exist, they would know how I feel and understand me more than anybody else.
Beautifully created that it feels close to coming alive.

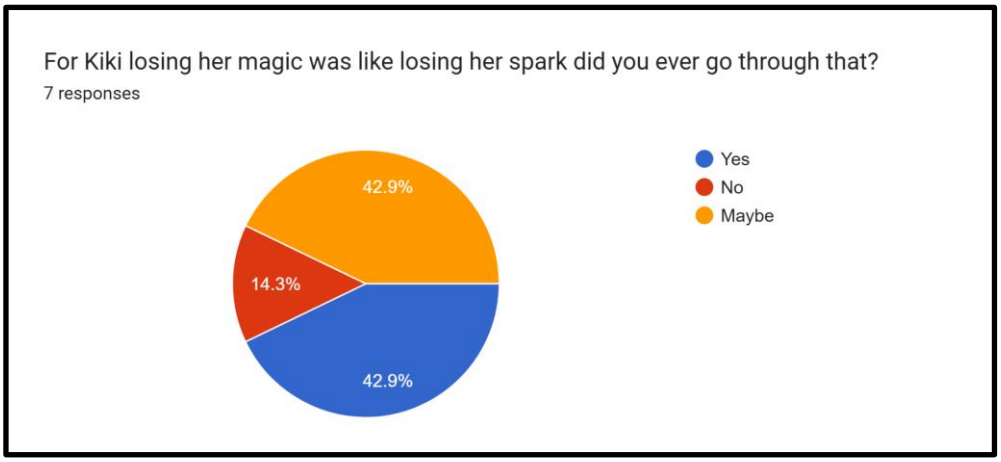
Question 3. How do you feel about the fantasy elements shown in these Ghibli movies?

The responders have vividly described how they feel about the fantasy elements, emphasizing how the fantasy or magic part of the Ghibli movies give a sense of calm and comfort to audience. One responder highlighted how Ghibli movies reflect the emotions we cannot express like confusion or loneliness, and the imagination gives a form to that emotion. Moreover, the responders feel that the movies usher a sense of yearning to belong somewhere.


If you could call one character from My Neighbour Totoro/ Spirited Away/ Kiki's delivery service/ The boy and the heron/ When Marnie was Here in a time of need, who would you call ?
18 responses
Totoro
Kiki
totoro
I would call Haku.
He feels calm, protective, and quietly supportive. Even when Chihiro feels lost, he believes in her and helps guide her. Having someone like that beside you when everything feels uncertain would mean a lot.
Urusura

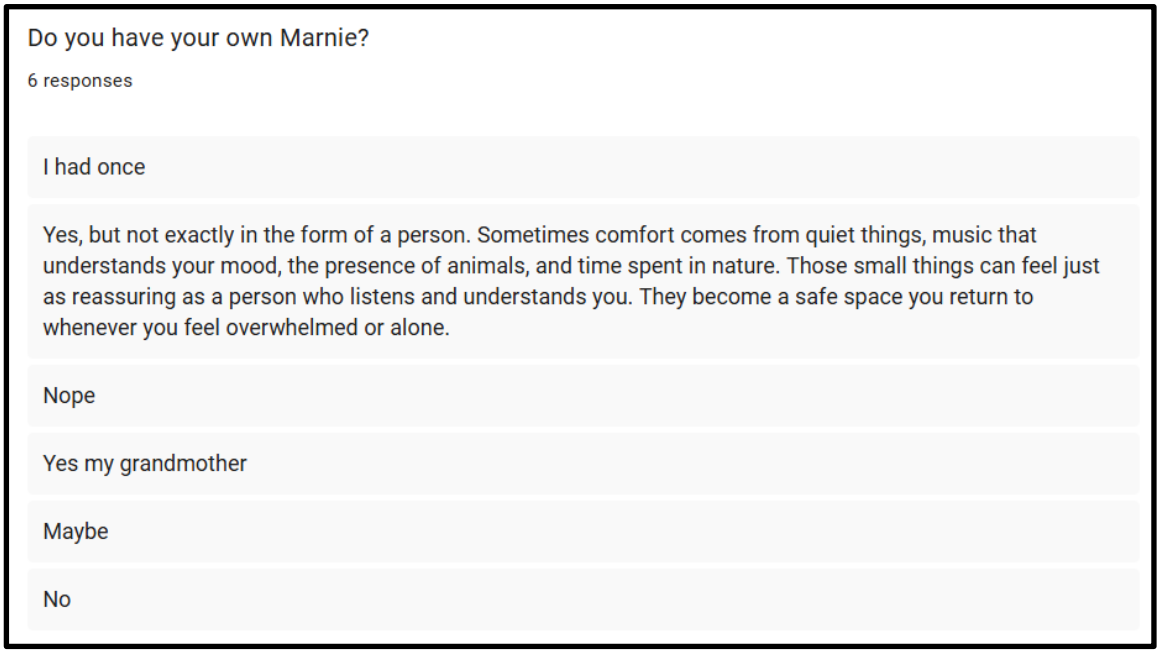
Question 4. If you could call one character from My Neighbor Totoro/ Kiki's delivery service/ Spirited Away/ When Marnie was here/ The Boy and the Heron in the time of need, who would you call?

The responders chose Totoro, Haku, Kiki and Ursula. Both Totoro and Haku appear when Mei and Satsuki and Chihiro needed support. Totoro simply stays with them whereas Haku guides Chihiro.



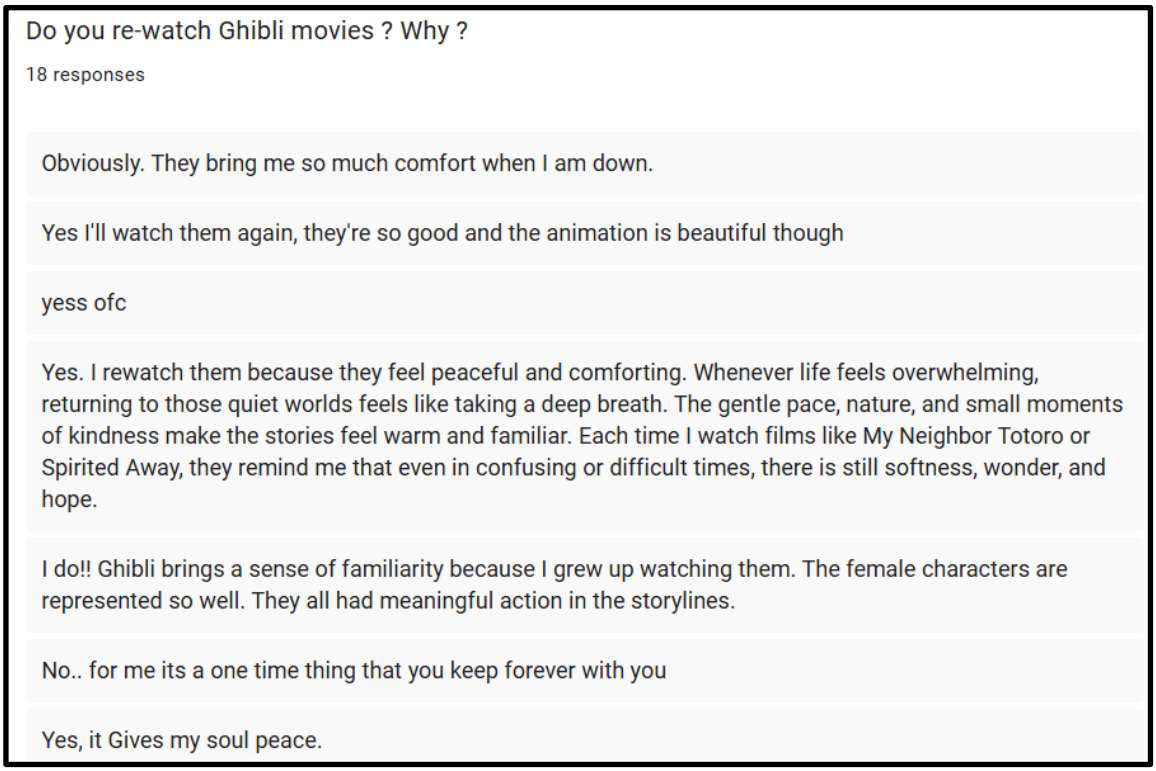
Question 5. For Kiki losing her magic was like losing her spark did you ever go through that?

42.9% respondents said yes and 42.9% said maybe, and 14.3% of the respondents said No. Kiki's loss of magic can be linked the burnout experiences by several children and adults.


Do you have your own Marnie?
6 responses
I had once
Yes, but not exactly in the form of a person. Sometimes comfort comes from quiet things, music that understands your mood, the presence of animals, and time spent in nature. Those small things can feel just as reassuring as a person who listens and understands you. They become a safe space you return to whenever you feel overwhelmed or alone.
Nope
Yes my grandmother
Maybe
No

Question 6. Do you have your own Marnie?

The respondent's answers varied, one respondent wrote her grandmother about being her Marnie and one wrote about how comfort can arrive in the small things like music, animals and time spent in the lap of nature.


Do you re-watch Ghibli movies ? Why ?
18 responses
Obviously. They bring me so much comfort when I am down.
Yes I'll watch them again, they're so good and the animation is beautiful though
yess ofc
Yes. I rewatch them because they feel peaceful and comforting. Whenever life feels overwhelming, returning to those quiet worlds feels like taking a deep breath. The gentle pace, nature, and small moments of kindness make the stories feel warm and familiar. Each time I watch films like My Neighbor Totoro or Spirited Away, they remind me that even in confusing or difficult times, there is still softness, wonder, and hope.
I do!! Ghibli brings a sense of familiarity because I grew up watching them. The female characters are represented so well. They all had meaningful action in the storylines.
No.. for me its a one time thing that you keep forever with you
Yes, it Gives my soul peace.

Question 7. Do you re-watch Ghibli movies? Why?

The respondents answered that they re-watch Ghibli movies because they feel comforting and in the busy everyday life it can remind them of hope and softness.

Conclusion

In the above movies, the fantasy realm is never observed as an escape from reality but as a psychological foundation to rebuild identity and resilience. In My Neighbor Totoro the forest spirits act as the secure base for Satsuki and Mei, the emotional scaffolding essential to endure their mother's illness. In Kiki's delivery service the loss of flight is maneuvered as a metaphor of psychosomatic burnout. In Spirited Away the bath house acts as a site for individuation where Chihiro is working to reclaim her name amidst a dehumanizing environment. In both films like When Marnie was There and The Boy in the Heron the fantastical encounters are implemented to reduce the gap between grief and acceptance. On one hand, Anna has connected with ancestral roots and consequently, Mahito navigated dissociative dreamscapes to heal from the loss. Both the characters employ fantasy well and characters to solve the "unbearable".

Eventually, Miyazaki's work propounds that magic is a temporary but necessary tool and a path for the psyche to organize chaos, practice agency and gradually return to the real world with the resilience needed to reside in it.

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